Bleached resistance: The politics of grunge

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Introduction

Since its inception, rock music has been associated with subversion. Attempts to ban it from the airwaves are as old as the music itself. The roots of rock can be found in what was once called "race" music, and eventually rhythm and blues. The phrase "rock 'n' roll," as a musical term, was popularized by disc jockey Alan Freed to diminish the racial connotation of rhythm and blues, and thus to make it more palatable to white audiences (Morthland 92). Crossing the musical race barrier in the 1950s was a subversive act, especially when the music was loaded with sexual connotations, as in such songs as "Work with Me Annie" (Martin and Segrave 1-68). From early on, rock was associated with African-Americans, freedom, and youth, and thus deemed a threat to a responsible and respectable American way of life. And, of course, the opponents of rock were right, it *was* a threat to the American way of life (conformist, bland, segregated; hysterical, paranoid, megalo-maniacal). Rock was born as a form of cultural opposition, an opposition that had definite political connotations.

While Little Richard, Elvis, and Jerry Lee were not "political" in a narrow sense, they supported a cultural atmosphere in which the affiliation of white college students and African-American civil rights activists in resistance to Jim Crow and the Vietnam conflict made perfect sense. If '50s rock authenticated race consciousness and rebellion, '60s rock promised an ecstatic utopianism dwelling just beyond the confines of commodified American values. Even bands who settled into the heart of the cultural mainstream (like the Rolling Stones) mixed sex and race in ways that violated the miscegenational codes of postwar America.

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Still, there has always been a tension between rock's explicit and implicit subversive implications and its status as a commodity in highly profitable and centralized corporate structures. Rock music constitutes a huge industry, in which the majority of participants are mostly interested in rock's value as "entertainment." Artistic authenticity and commercialism constantly compete in pop music culture (Frith 39-57). This is true of all artistic expressions, of course, but the tension is magnified in pop music because of the massive potential for marketability, and the immediacy of the impact. As a result, rock is a form of music that is often at war with itself. "Authentic" performers dismiss the mainstream while intentionally or unintentionally moving into it, sometimes, as in Nirvana's case, by redefining it. Commercial success then is often both coveted and despised. And the "underground" artists of one period can become the mainstream artists of the next (the Grateful Dead, Pink Floyd), leading to skepticism about the authenticity of their musical commitments and those of their fans. This tension between authenticity and accessibility lies at the heart of the political and cultural economy of rock music.

The contradictions between representations of artistic and political integrity and the demands of commerce have become, if anything, more acute through the history of rock. In the earliest stages of rock's development, a certain innocence existed. Judging authenticity was not a central discursive activity. Bob Dylan destabilized the line between the perceived authenticity of folk and the triviality of teen dance music with his electric guitar at Newport (and symbolically crossed the race line), infusing rock with a seriousness that had previously been absent. Sixties artists, from the Grateful Dead to Iggy Pop, took advantage of the opening. But as rock's identification with political subversion and the cultural underground advanced, a new dialectic was at work, which exploded into punk defiance in the 1970s.

Whether punk's musical birth was in England or the United States, punk was most overtly political in England. The United States version eschewed the class and race themes that were central to English punk politics. In the United States, punk preceded grunge. Grunge further depoliticized punk in certain respects, just as it created spaces for political resistance and the redefinition of pop culture.

Punk

> Youth, after all, is not a permanent condition, and a clash of
> generations is not so fundamentally dangerous to the art of
> government as would be a clash between rulers and ruled.
>   —liner notes to Clash's "White Riot"
>   (qtd. in Hebdige 25)

Punk was born on November 6, 1975, at the Sex Pistols' first
concert, performed at an English art school. The school's social secretary
(perhaps wisely) pulled the plug (Miller 25). Punk had a huge impact on
rock music, an impact that is still strongly felt two decades later as punk
continuously redefines the pop mainstream.

Punk, while simple and direct as a musical form, represented a
highly complex set of social phenomena. Punk's rebellions were both
internal and external to pop music. As an internal critique, punk was, in
Hebdige's words, "designed to undercut the intellectual posturing of the
previous generation of rock musicians" (63). Punk sought to return rock
to its mythologically basic roots: loudness, three chords, and a basic
backbeat. Thus, punk bands liked the (early) Who while they belittled
Pink Floyd's art pretense (as with Johnny Rotten's "I Hate Pink Floyd"
T-shirt). But punk was no retro movement. Punk's wall-of-guitars sound,
which "produce[d] an overwhelming sense of claustrophobia," was
something new. It defined "a 'popular music' that avert[ed] almost all
the pop formulas" (Miller 27). The Sex Pistols were paradigmatic, with
their furious sound and lyrics, offensive and volatile on- and off-stage
behavior, torn and safety-pinned clothing, and predictable self-
destruction.

Punk's external politics, which cannot be entirely separated from its
musical and theatrical positionings, was consciously working-class,
antiracist, and antiauthoritarian. Punk was most highly and overtly
politicized in England. The Clash's Joe Strummer ranted against police
brutality and cheered a "white riot" while wearing a Red Brigade T-shirt.
Tom Robinson mixed left and gay messages. Elvis Costello raged against
the fascism of the personal and political.[1] And the Gang of Four declared:
"We are all socialists" (Marcus, *Ranters and Crowd Pleasers* 50).

Punk leftism represented a politics of everyday life, where punks fought skinheads and began "Rock Against Racism" (RAR) (in response to Eric Clapton's 1976 onstage advice to "Keep Britain White" [Frith and Street 67-68]). RAR was, according to Frith and Street, "not just a touring rock show . . . nor just an oppositional spectacle; it also set an ideological and organizational example . . . It mixed punk cut-up style with 'our dubbed version of Marxism' and was a constant source of names, contacts, and addresses" (70). Even the Pistols, whose intense nihilism and personal obnoxiousness ruled out concrete political commitments, invoked potent political messages in songs like "God Save the Queen" and "Anarchy in the UK."

The intensity of punk rebellion did at times lead it to flirtations with neofascist symbolism, and some street punks were no doubt associated with the National Front. (Punks fought skinheads and sometimes *became* skinheads.) Still it would be bizarre to suggest, as *National Review* columnist Edward Meadows did, that "New Wave is at base a right-wing political protest" (1312). Greil Marcus is more on target. He has linked punk to a variety of radical artistic and social movements, including the Paris Commune, Dada, the Berkeley Free Speech Movement, and "1968." Punk, as embodied by the Pistols, unleashed a counter-politics and counterculture in the late 1970s which could not be contained by any political "ideology." They made a crucial mark on what Marcus has signified as the "secret history of the twentieth century" (Marcus, *Lipstick Traces* 19-21), a history that circumscribes various political positionings, not all of them especially attractive. Still, most punk bands were consciously left-wing in one way or another. Punks' "class-consciousness" stemmed partly from their actual working-class origins and from their embracing of them. Punk style was grounded in a working-class aesthetic; they celebrated "earthiness and scruffiness" (Hebdige 63).

Punk could not, however, escape rock's internal contradictions. During the Clash's performance of "White Riot" in 1977 at the Rainbow, all the seats were torn out and tossed onto the stage, except for the last two rows in which CBS Records executives sat and observed the performance. As Hebdige states, somewhat cynically, "There could be no clearer demonstration of the fact that symbolic assaults leave real institutions intact" (160).[2] The Pistols probably came as close as anybody in maintaining a weird purity, but only at the cost of destroying themselves.

Punk class-orientation was interwoven with identification with the music and culture of racially oppressed groups. Musical and political connections were made with black artists, especially reggae groups. Punk looked to reggae in somewhat the same way that an earlier generation of white musicians looked to the blues. Rastafarianism, although more messianic and spiritual than punk, also reflected conscious resistance to Western systems of power and oppression. Punks drew on the Rastafarians to extend their sense of (white) alienation. "[P]unk aesthetic," as Hebdige has noted, "can be read in part as a white 'translation' of 'black ethnicity'" (66). Punks' working-class status entitled them to claims of dispossession, but their associations with West Indians allowed them to strengthen their identities as outsiders (67-68).

Punks were outsiders, then, both by circumstance and by design. Their embrace of alienation was reflected in clothing, music, and blank stares. It was a stance that later became a pose, adopted as a style for middle-class English and American youth, as 70s punk dissolved into a fashion trend ("Square's Guide" 108). This sometimes led to clashes between poseurs and "real punks," as when nightclub owner and "queen of the disco" Regine "threw a punk party" in Paris: "Everything went fine until a bunch of genuine punks showed up. Regine had to call in the gendarmes" (Schwartz 81).

Punk culture was a youth culture, which pointed back to earlier rock phenomena like the Teddy Boys and the Mods, the latter of whom were implicated in the '60s version of the "generation gap" (Hebdige 46-52). Punks extended generational politics by turning their hostility against those who had invented it. "Hippies" were as much a target of punk wrath as conventional political and cultural authorities. Sid Vicious complained about his mother's dragging him to rock festivals. Hippies had long since lost any claims to oppositional status as various signs and symbols of hippie culture were adopted by the mainstream (Arnold, *Route 666* 123). So, whereas long-haired hippies proclaimed ethics of "peace and love," punks invented the slam dance and closely cropped their hair. The Grateful Dead—primary exemplars of "corrupt" '60s counter-culture—were marked as a chief symbol of decay. Thus, we have Gina Arnold's wonderful quip that her parents had taken her to her first Grateful Dead concert when she was four, and she had "hated the Grateful Dead ever since" (*Route 666*, coverflap).

American Punk

If the explosion of punk as a subculture happened first in England, Americans can make a good case that the roots of punk are found in the United States with the likes of MC5, Iggy Pop, Patti Smith, and, of course, the New York Dolls. But American early punk-era bands tended toward minimalism and "New Wave," and were often the products of art school dropouts. The first distinguished American punk/New Wave bands, like Talking Heads, the Ramones, and Modern Lovers, eschewed the intense nihilism, vacancy, or even safety-pin style of the English punks. (There were exceptions, of course, like the Cleveland band the Dead Boys.)

Just as punk was being declared dead by punks themselves ("Extensions Downtown" 28), a neopunk underground was re-inventing itself in New York clubs. This scene, documented on the *No New York* LP, stretched punk toward its avant-garde limits and sustained it as an alternative pop movement. Slamdancing may, in fact, have originated in the "No Wave" milieu of late-'70s neopunk. Saxophonist-singer James Chance is pictured on the back of the album cover with black eyes, apparently the result of fighting with his audience.

Punk then found its way to California in the early 1980s, and landed in bands like X and Black Flag, the latter of which was also notorious for the violence of its shows. (The California punk scene has been documented by Penelope Spheeris in her somewhat condescending film *The Decline . . . of Western Civilization*.) New York "No Wave" and California punk provided the bridge between early punk and New Wave and what eventually became the Seattle grunge scene.

Many important similarities existed between English and American punk cultures, but there were also important divergences. First, American punk tended to focus its energy toward generational antagonism almost to the exclusion of class and racial conflicts. Moreover, punk critique in the United States was mostly focused on the culture of pop music itself and the music business. Punk opposition thus tended to be more "cultural," and less overtly "political" (although the distinction is hardly rigorous).

The generational aspects of punk rebellion in the United States coalesced in its magnified opposition to "hippie" culture. Punk's development in the United States was, according to Gina Arnold, "first and foremost strongly anti-hippie" (*Route 666* 13). Opposition to hippies

meant opposition to pretense. The hippie bands of the 1960s—Steve Miller, Jefferson Starship, and "especially the Grateful Dead" (13)—had developed high cultural aspirations. Long guitar jams from the likes of Jerry Garcia, Duane Allman, and Eric Clapton epitomized the desire of rockers to reach toward jazz or classical proficiency. Moreover, hippie bands expressed a faith in the transformational value of a musical politics of "love." Arnold cringes at ELO's Jeff Lynne's remark that "he looked forward to the day when they could send holograms of themselves to arenas to 'play' all over the world." Thus, "the beginning of punk rock was a vast celebration of utter contemptuousness" (*Route 666* 13).

American punk, like the English version, would return rock to its roots. In the late 1960s, rock artists spent considerable energy attempting to move radio stations away from the 3-minute pop format to accommodate long instrumental solos. In the 1980s, punk reversed the trend. Moreover, there would be no punk "stars." Central to U.S. punk music was the idea that '60s hippie rockers had become old, soft, and complacent, anathema to rock's original subversive commitments (Arnold, *Route 666* 13-16).

Connected to generational opposition was American punk's resistance to "corporate rock." Opposition to major '60s bands like the Stones and the Dead reflected a kind of punk populism. Unless bands were willing to conform to the musical standards of '60s rock, or eventually disco, then access to radio play was extremely limited, if not entirely nonexistent (Arnold, *Route 666* 21-30). Punk bands, then, objected to the corporatization of rock as well as their exclusion from that corporatization. In fact, the strangulation of the airwaves by AOR (album-oriented rock) has been a constant theme of alternative artists. Jello Biafra stated, "Punk was an outbreak of new talent that happened all over the world and opened the door to a whole new generation of people who had ideas to replace the bankrupt swill that was being regurgitated [by those] who maintained a stranglehold on the airwaves in the seventies by churning out repetitive pablum and whatnot" (qtd. in Arnold, *Route 666* 16). Ironically, of course, the music was deliberately unsuited for a mass market. Punks, following '60s underground bands, opposed the market while attempting to draw the market toward them, thus following what seems to be the eternal contradictions posed by oppositional pop music.

Punk's racial and class orientations in the United States were also different from those in the English contexts. Quite simply, punk in the United States, for the most part, ignored class issues. Hard-edged American punk bands, like the Dead Boys, and eventually X, dealt with themes of violence, sexuality, and alienation, but seldom adopted the working-class perspectives of bands like the Clash. In the United States, in fact, punk is probably more of a suburban, upper-middle-class phenomenon than in England. Underground radio stations that carried punk formats were almost always associated with colleges and universities (Arnold, *Route 666* 21-30). Working-class pop music in the United States tends to be heavy metal, a music that is often (although not always) devoid of overt political themes.

This distinction between punk's construction in the United States and in England should not be surprising since it follows broader political and cultural distinctions between United States and European societies. American politics has never had a strong class orientation, and a vast academic literature has been generated on the topic of "American exceptionalism" (e.g., Davis; Katznelson; Katznelson and Zolberg). American popular music, even oppositional music, unsurprisingly reflects these differences. In developing their oppositions, English working-class bands bring their class consciousness easily into their artistic products, while American bands are much more likely to focus on individualistic themes: antiauthoritarianism and personal angst. Nirvana is, of course, paradigmatic in these terms.

American punk bands did not position themselves symbolically or literally in relation to African-American oppression or even black musical forms. Punk in the United States is almost uniformly white. While connections exist between alternative and rap bands, the close association between black artists and white rockers that once reflected rock's dependence on the blues is rare. Elvis, Jerry Lee Lewis, and John Lennon were all explicit in their debts to African-American music. The same cannot be said of punk or especially grunge artists. Punk music in the United States had virtually none of the cross-racial connotations that it had in England. Reggae has not had the same impact in the United States as in England.

Grunge

> You know what I hate about rock? I hate tie-dyed T-shirts. I
> wouldn't wear a tie-dyed T-shirt unless it was dyed with the urine of
> Phil Collins and the blood of Jerry Garcia.
>
> —Kurt Cobain (qtd. in
> Arnold, *Route 666* 11)

What is grunge music? According to producer Jack Endino, grunge is "seventies-influenced, slowed-down punk music." Kim Thayil defined it as "sleepy, smeary, staggering, drunken music." And Sub Pop co-owner Jonathan Poneman labeled it "backwoods yeti stomp" (qtd. in Azerrad, "Grunge City" 44). The term "grunge" was generally attached to bands that began in the Northwest and that were associated in various ways with the Seattle music scene.

Grunge is generally considered to be a synthesis of heavy metal and punk. As Azerrad notes, Seattle's musical traditions incorporated class and musical aspects of punk and metal in distinctive patterns: "Metal kids from Seattle's suburbs liked punk's exotic cool, while downtown punks liked metal for its theatricality, for its uncanny ability to annoy pointy-headed New Wavers and because it just plain rocked" ("Grunge City" 48). As Kurt Cobain stated it, "I was looking for something a lot heavier, yet melodic at the same time . . . something different from heavy metal, a different attitude" (qtd. in Azerrad, "Nirvana" 40).[3]

The Melvins were probably the first authentic grunge band. Originally from Cobain's hometown of Aberdeen, Washington, and still virtually unknown outside the West Coast alternative scene, the Melvins are undoubtedly the slowest hard guitar rock band in existence. Cobain once unsuccessfully auditioned for the band, and his guitar style was clearly influenced by Buzz Osborne's, an influence that can easily be heard on the first Nirvana album, *Bleach.* Other grunge bands, which have developed more listenable styles, such as Mudhoney, Soundgarden, and Pearl Jam, have experienced varying degrees of success. Grunge's musical influence, as expressed through these bands, will undoubtedly be felt for a long time. Ultimately Nirvana became the paradigmatic grunge band, because of its sudden and astounding success and the anticharismatic presence of Kurt Cobain.

Nirvana, it is worth noting, is seen by many fans as the apotheosis not only of grunge but of punk music in general. Gina Arnold, for example, believes that Nirvana's success was the result of "a sort of secret hole scratched painstakingly through [a] wall of conformity, eked into being while no one was looking by prisoners of the underground with the pinlike persistence of the Birdman of Alcatraz" (*Route 666*, 174-75). While I appreciate Cobain's music, I also believe that Nirvana represents a depoliticized and domesticated version of original punk. Its melodic character subverts punk. Moreover, the intense sadness of the music is overwhelming, robbing it of the sense of danger that suffused early punk. Grunge, in other words, follows the path beaten by earlier American punk and New Wave bands whose primary goals were to make musical and artistic statements and to position themselves as part of a cultural underground. Still, grunge did create a politics of sorts, a politics which can be specified along four lines: (1) generational conflict, (2) independent recording, (3) style, and (4) gender politics.

Kill the Boomers: Grunge's Generational Politics

Intergenerational animosity is a central message of some grunge rockers. The depth of hostility is captured in an interview in *Rolling Stone* with members of Soundgarden. Guitarist Kim Thayil launched the following diatribe against baby boomers:

There's millions and millions of people in their 40s who think they're so fucking special. . . . They're this ultimate white-bread suburban upper-middle-class group that were spoiled little fuckers as kids 'cause they were all children of Dr. Spock, and then they were stupid stinky hippies, and then they were spoiled yuppie materialists. Now they're all at the age where they produce films and news reports, and it's the same nostalgia trip with *that*. They're denying other age groups their own memories. (qtd. in Neely 53)

On one level, Thayil is simply repeating rock's perennial impulse to kill off the fathers, an impulse that can be traced back at least to Chuck Berry's "Roll Over, Beethoven." But his comments don't simply evoke Berry or even Pete Townshend. Berry's Freudianism was largely ironic, and "My Generation" (the Who) was pure celebration, entirely focused on the *possibilities* of youth. Early punk sought to transform rock from a youth culture phenomenon into a serious politics of class and race.

Thayil's remarks, angry and focused as they are on baby boomers as a class, erase much of the authentic political and cultural radicalism of the best early punk.

Thayil's rant must, of course, be considered in relation to recent debates over the meaning and significance of Generation X. The Douglas Coupland book that coined the term has done as much as any single work to represent the generational politics of X-ers (who often dislike the label). Coupland resents the hypocrisies of "bleeding ponytails"—"elderly sold-out baby boomer[s] who pine for hippie or pre-sellout days" (21). Generation X-ers aren't just angry that boomers sold out, though, they resent their own apparent lack of options to do the same. In Coupland's world, X-ers only face "mcjob[s]": "low-pay, low-prestige, low-dignity, low-benefit, no-future job[s] in the service sector. Frequently considered a satisfying career choice by people who have never held one" (5). And whereas Pete Townshend told his elders to "just fade away," Coupland instructs his readers to, "Eat [y]our parents." "Sometimes," he says, "I'd just like to mace them. I want to tell them that I envy their upbringings that were so clean, so free of *futurelessness*. And I want to throttle them for blithely handing over the world to us like so much skid-marked underwear" (86).

That the older generation stole the future and saddled X-ers with what are left of the crumbs was the central theme of Coupland's book, an appendix of which provides statistical evidence of the economic, social, and environmental threats faced by Generation X, including: increasing numbers of younger people in poverty and unable to afford a home, unwillingness of this group to marry, and the number of dead lakes in Canada (181-83). The theme of "no future" was partially prefigured by the Sex Pistols in "Anarchy in the UK," but the Pistols' version captured a complicated politics of nihilistic rebellion and class resistance. The Coupland/Thayil version, which must be considered in relation to the more systematic analysis provided by economists Neil Howe and Bill Strauss in their book *Thirteen Gen*, largely ignores the specificities of class, race, and gender. As Andrew Cohen has observed, "What Coupland's young people . . . share is a peculiarly conservative and middle-class disappointment—a sense of entitlement gone sour" (98).

Gen-X disenchantment has been translated into the conservative politics of the lobbying group "Lead or Leave." Jon Coward and Ron Nelson, organizers of this "movement," which has received funding

from Ross Perot, have called for a balanced budget, the privatization of social security, elimination of affirmative action, and the placement of peacekeeping troops in the inner cities (Cohen 100). More recently, "Third Millennium," a related "activist" group, has decried "fraud and abuse" in government and called for increasing the retirement age to 75 (Farley, "Taking Shots" 30).

While it is true that the American standard of living is in decline (see Reich; Phillips), the consequences haven't fallen neatly along generational lines, and they aren't likely to any time soon. One's "generation" isn't the primary determinant of social or economic position. "Generation," in fact, means very little without being particularized in race, class, and gender terms. Such specifications, however, are virtually ignored by Coupland or Howe and Strauss. And they don't dominate the thematics of grunge rock songs, many of which, like Soundgarden's "Black Hole Sun," rely on romantically apocalyptic themes reminiscent of Wagner.

While Kurt Cobain wasn't middle-class, his internal conflicts spoke to a generation of middle-class youth who have found their reduced economic prospects to be intolerable. In response, grunge offered what Sarah Ferguson has labeled the "politics of damage." "Being damaged is a hedge against the illusory promises of consumer culture" (Ferguson 60). At the same time it "offers a defense against the claims of gangsta rappers and punk rock feminists" (Ferguson 60). Damage entitles one to a claim of dispossession. At the same time it sanctions an emotional space beyond both resistance and apathy. Early punks "knew who the enemy was" (Ferguson 61): authority, order, power, and just about everything else. In the ideology of grunge, the enemy turns out to be the self. The politics of grunge occupies an emotional terrain in which the need for self-help devolves into the desire for self-annihilation.

"At its most radical," Hal Foster has remarked, "grunge was an aesthetic of indifference that went beyond a pose of boredom to a desire to be done with it all" (A31). As Kurt Cobain so graphically put it: "I hate myself . . . and I want to die" (qtd. in Wright 60). The perfect metaphor for such an apolitical politics is heroin (Trip 1). Cobain's heroin addiction wasn't accidental. He stated his *desire* to become a junkie. He revered William Burroughs and eventually made a record with him (*The "Priest" They Called Him*). Burroughs, of course,

renounced heroin, while Cobain pursued the logic of addiction to its ultimate end. Heroin use now marks 1990s slacker culture in somewhat the same way that LSD experimentation identified 1960s hippies. But whereas LSD promised psychic expansion, heroin offers emotional erasure. Heroin's move up the charts paralleled Nirvana's (Hochman 25-27), as grunge music subverted punk leftism with a peculiarly American ideology of the self.

Grunge and Politics of Business

A concrete and positive, but still ambiguous, contribution of grunge politics can be found in its commitment to independent recording. In the grunge worldview, the indie company becomes the antithesis of all that is bad and old. It represents independence, creative control, and anti-authoritarianism all in one package.

Independent record companies were certainly not invented by grunge or punk rockers. The first explosion of independent recording occurred in the 1940s and 1950s. Relatively small but successful specialty companies like Chess and Sun, which began with close associations to black rhythm and blues artists, are well known, but many others, such as Cobra and Veejay, while less well known, also made strong contributions to the development of rock music. "It would," says critic Tom Piazza, "be difficult to overstate the important role these companies filled in the development of the postwar American music industry" (H25). They were the conduits through which black rhythm-and-blues and, later, white rockabilly flowed into the broader stream of American popular music, eventually creating the rock-and-roll industry. And because of opposition by the majors to rock music, independents tended to dominate it until the mid-1960s (Martin and Segrave 13). In the 1960s, rock musicians challenged the control of major labels, and in that spirit the Beatles founded Apple Records, a company that recorded the Beatles themselves and other artists, and that collapsed after the Beatles' breakup.

Punk rock brought a new vitality to independent record labels. Simon Frith notes, "In the first six months of 1980 ninety new labels appeared in Britain" (155). The new labels were a response to the "professionalization" of rock music, which made it increasingly difficult for talented amateurs to be recorded. New companies were set up (e.g., Chiswick and Stiff) to record the music, much of which was punk rock.

According to Frith, "The punk independents had a new ideology: they weren't just the labels of on-the-ground entrepreneurs, recording bands whose live popularity was evident; they were also, increasingly, formed by musicians who were recording themselves, going public via do-it-yourself production" (156).[4]

This new indie movement became possible as the minimum cost of making records dropped, especially for punk bands who rejected slick production techniques and the costs they entailed. They "sounded fine through four-track tape recorders, and there were soon as many street-corner, amateur records being made as there had been in New York in the late 1950s" (Frith 156). Major punk bands, however, like the Sex Pistols and the Clash, did sign with major labels, while expressing serious reservations about them, if not outright hostility toward them. (The Sex Pistols' conflicts with EMI were fairly well publicized at the time of their signing and led to one of their most vitriolic songs—"EMI." The Clash related a somewhat more subdued version of their climb into the majors in the song "That's No Way to Spend Your Youth": "First we got ourselves a manager, and though he's not the mafia, a contract is a contract, when you've got a manager.")

The rise of alternative punk labels reinforced a certain idealism on the part of the bands that was now wrapped into the notion of the indies themselves. The result was to move "attention back from markets to musicians, to the way music works to symbolize and focus communities" (Frith 156). But this also generated new tensions within the rock world, between those bands committed to local audiences, low-budget recording, and not "selling out," and those bands who "made it." Frith states that independent record companies "articulated an explicitly anti-professional attitude to record-making, a concern for music as a mode of survival rather than a means to profit." Artists seemingly had to choose between "local love" and "mass success" (157).

This tension was reconstructed into American punk/grunge ideology. Calvin Johnson became a central player in the Northwest grunge scene, because of his commitment to punk rock first as a DJ at KAOS radio in Olympia, Washington, and later (and more importantly) as founder of K records. (He was also a founding member of the band Beat Happenings, "a cross between Jonathan Richman and the Cramps" [Arnold, *Route 666* 112]). Kurt Cobain purportedly had a tatoo of K records on the back of his arm, done by Dave Grohl with a pin (Arnold, *Route 666* 112). But

the most celebrated and influential indie company of the Northwest was Jonathan Poneman and Bruce Pravitt's Sub Pop (a name borrowed from Pravitt's fanzine, *Subterranean Pop*). Sub Pop was originally organized by Pravitt in 1986-87 to document the Seattle alternative scene. Early recordings included Green River's *Dry As a Bone* EP, Soundgarden's *Screaming Life* and *Fopp* EPs, and then Mudhoney's *Touch Me, I'm Sick* and *Superfuzz Bigmuff* EPs. These records became the foundation of the Seattle sound (Arnold, *Route 666* 157). And Sub Pop recorded Nirvana's first album, *Bleach,* in 1988, for $606.17 (a figure that is registered on the back of the album, as a testament, presumably, to its punk authenticity).

Sub Pop went on to become the most well-known Amer-Indie label. But the road from obscurity to fame and profitability was hardly a certain one. Sub Pop was on the verge of bankruptcy until they signed a distribution agreement for Nirvana's second album, *Nevermind,* which went on to sell several million copies (Azerrad, *Come As You Are* 323-33).

The political content of independent recording is not easily discerned. Pravitt describes himself as a "democratic capitalist" who believes that "[politics] comes down to empowering people financially." He also connects investment to the community context in which music is made:

We were always very conscious that people need to be liking something more than just the band—that to understand it, they need to understand the community it comes from. That's why our photos always, from the very start, showed the fans as well as the band: so people could see the real intimacy between the two, so that they could feel, "Yes! I could be a part of it!" In our world, the fans were celebrated as much as the bands. (qtd. in Arnold, *Route 666* 160)

Indie bands are hardly alone, of course, in claiming such a connection. In country music, for example, intense artist/fan connections are highly prized, if not expected. Pravitt has contrasted the communitarianism created by alternative rock with the egotism and greed of the 1980s (Arnold, *Route 666* 160-61). Indie recording thus presumably challenges political power by creating alternative communities that can be inspired and financially supported by those

companies. Underlying this, however, may be a commitment as much to a liberal success ethic as to a democratic egalitarian one. Gina Arnold's analysis of Nirvana is revealing in this regard:

> Now I dream of the day when an indie from our world gets to where Nirvana is under its very own steam. Why shouldn't it? If Run D.M.C. and Ice Cube can do it that way, hitting 2 million sales on a five-thousand dollar promo budget, why not Fugazi next? Nirvana will always be glad to give them a leg up. Hell, knowing them, they're probably already poised, hands clasped at knee level, preparing to give them or someone like them that crucial boost. (*Route 666* 227)

While such an idealization may be little more than an "alternative" version of the liberal success paradigm, some indie labels push beyond it. Bettina Richards, founder of the Thrill Jockey label, takes the communal aspects of independent production seriously. Richards signs no contracts unless the bands want them, splits profits fifty-fifty, and commits bands to only one release at a time. Bands are also involved in all aspects of production and marketing. According to Natasha Stovall, "Thrill Jockey's consciously nonexploitative business practices—which are shared by indie labels across the country—mirror models adopted by Womyn's labels and lefty businesses generally, as an alternative to corporate capitalism's disposable Kleenex approach to employees and product" (13). (But do they provide health insurance?)

The most thoughtful indie entrepreneurs see themselves as carving out models of cooperative social and economic space. Indie labels would then organize musical and artistic communities to challenge liberal society by their very presence. They would be designed not merely to poise artists toward success but to provide vehicles for the distribution of local and regional musical developments and to make it possible for local talent to make a living plying their trade. The Washington, D.C., punk band Fugazi provides something of a model here. The band does its own recording, has its own system of distribution, and requires that CDs be sold for no more than $10 at any distribution outlet. Eric Weisbard argues, "In many ways indie resembled '80s radical movements, especially in its ingrained conviction that real power over the mainstream was unattainable, so the only workable model for resistance had to be small-scale change and self-transformation—the personal as political" (16).

Still, pressures toward conventional success are difficult to escape. Alternative groups are constantly in "danger" of vaulting into the mainstream, as Nirvana's success demonstrated, and as, more recently, the success of the neopunk band Green Day has done. Indie/alternative recording and distribution have now become big business, trailing the success of Nirvana and other Northwest bands. MTV's *120 Minutes* is devoted to independent and alternative music. *Rolling Stone* gives attention to obscure and indie recordings on a regular basis. And there is at least one paid online subscription service for those interested in the alternative scene—Sonicnet. Sub Pop has now sold 49% of its shares to Warner Bros. (Wiederhorn 25), ending any claims it may have had to being an "authentic" indie shop. The platinum success of Soul Asylum, Green Day, and Offspring may, in fact, mark the real "death of punk."

The tensions within authentic pop, revealed by Frith, are still very much a part of the alternative idiom. While alternative ideology marks opposition to the dominant liberal/capitalist ethos, alternative scenes sustain cultures which are in opposition to the democratic/egalitarian values that they proclaim. Cliquishness or elitism pervades youth culture in general and has historically been an aspect of bohemian culture. Jennifer Toomey of the band Tsunami, and an owner of her own indie label, has written that "an alternative community that claims to be inclusive and yet remains so enamored of the 'fringes'" has, as its "main concern . . . not communication or accessibility but, ultimately, cliquishness" (Weisbard 17). The current indie scene has certain parallels to the jazz scene of the '30s and '40s in which a bright line was drawn between what was hip or cool and what was popular. Rock 'n' roll's most enduring contribution, on the other hand, back in the days of the Beatles and Rolling Stones, may have been to transform politics through culture, because of its very popularity. "On some basic level," as Weisbard notes, "the fundamental unresolved issue here—one that artists and fans have to work out individually—is not major labels versus indies, but the extent to which rock gains in glory by seeking or attaining popularity" (19).

Sub Pop's own experience simply proves a point made by Frith about independent record companies, i.e., that to maintain solvency they must seek capitalization from the majors. Sub Pop's financial position was dependent, ultimately, on its capacity to develop talent that could be

distributed and ultimately produced by the majors themselves. On the other hand, the success of indie labels may be to help blur the lines between alternative and mainstream cultures. Weisbard is no doubt correct in asserting, "The word *mainstream* has virtually disappeared, even if the mainstream hasn't" (17). What this means, however, for punk or pop, remains, at this point, largely obscure.

Grunge as Style

Style is, as Stewart Ewen has shown, a political category. We need only look at the transitions in women's clothing from the Victorian styles of the 19th century to the mod, hippie, and punk styles of the postwar era, to gain some sense of the transformations of gender identity and redistributions of gender power.

As with punk, grunge's strongest immediate impact on culture was at least as widespread in the fashion world as in the music world. When the translation from musical to fashion style was accomplished, the bite that grunge may originally have possessed was virtually erased. The grunge style—ripped and dirty jeans and flannel shirts—was more or less a reversion to the hippie styles of the 1960s and 1970s. As with the hippies, it was intended to show identification with street people and other marginalized groups, while displaying disregard for appearance and contempt for consumer society. But as with both hippies and punks, it inevitably became co-opted by the very culture that it resisted.

By the end of 1992 Jonathan Poneman announced in *Vogue*: "Throw out your detergent! This is not a call to arms; it's an invitation to dress down and party up! As the fin de siècle draws near, greed has gone to seed. What started out as a serf's rebellion against aristocratic glamour has turned into a fashion revolution that champions 'revolting' for its own sake" (254). "The emphasis," said Poneman, "was on well-worn comfort, cheap beer, and high volume rock 'n' roll" (260).

By early 1993, *Mademoiselle* could declare that grunge's "down and dirty style had hit the mainstream," with a fashion spread featuring a jacket by Armani for $165, a shirt by Isani for $365 and a dress by Kathryn Dianos for $500 ("Grunge" 108). This was soon to be followed by home design with that same "down-and-dirty style," and advice to "Take your basic comfortable chair" with a broken arm and saw off the other one, and "Voila—a cool stool." The article also featured a $595 antique velvet side chair ("Mlle Copes" 100).

By April 1993, *Vanity Fair* had discovered "unlikely grunge wearers" Liz Smith, Joan Rivers, and Blaine Trump (Schiano 100). By May *Mademoiselle* announced a "grunge fragrance ("Scents of a Woman" 176). In October, Courtney Love revealed her own grunge diet secrets: "I lost FORTY POUNDS by not eating cheese. And I even ate a little mayonnaise" ("The Grunge Diet" 22). By November, even the Russians had jumped on the grunge bandwagon (Orlova 15).

Of course, as is almost always true with fashion, grunge's peaking signaled its collapse. As early as Spring 1993 fashion critic Todd Brewster declared grunge "tired and unoriginal" (112), and the August 1994 issue of *Glamour* asked, "tired of grunge?" ("Now, Elegant Sounds" 8). Music critics were also quick to declare the end of the grunge trend. In January 1993, *Rolling Stone*'s Grant Alden suggestively entitled his review of Nirvana's third album, *Incesticide*, "The Remains of Grunge." In September, reviewer Christopher John Farley declared in *Time* magazine's review of *In Utero* that "Grunge is dead" ("To the End" 81). And *Rolling Stone*'s November 1993 review of Pearl Jam's *VS.* asked, "Remember grunge?" (Considine 72). And, of course, on April 8, 1994, life imitated art as Kurt Cobain, whom the *New York Times* recognized as the "hesitant poet of 'grunge rock,'" was found dead from a self-inflicted gunshot wound in his Seattle home (Egan 1). Nirvana fans memorialized him by burning their flannel shirts (Arnold, "Into the Black" 34).

"Capitalism," as Evan Watkins has succinctly noted, "is an economy of change," and, "narratives of change . . . are about social position" (1).

It would be unfair to suggest that grunge's influence expired with Kurt Cobain. Brief stylistic movements can have dramatic short-term effects which fade into longer, more subtle, legacies. Punk as a momentary vacant, safety-pinned style was dead by 1980, but its influences have continued to sustain the rock underground for over a decade as they weave in and out of popular culture. While Cobain's death is unlikely to sustain the same "cultural obsessions" as Elvis's (see Marcus, *Dead Elvis*) or even John Lennon's, its tragic circumstances have been the theme of at least one rock album, Neil Young's *Sleeps with Angels*, and it has helped to transform Courtney Love into an icon of the cultural underground (although probably not a role model).

Grunge and Gender Politics

Rock music has, from its beginnings, been grounded in certain sexual ambiguities. On the one hand, rock has been a celebration of male-engendered sexual power. The plugged-in electric-guitar- slinging rock idol has been the paradigmatic cyborg figure of the postwar era. And men's power in rock has usually been expressed artistically and literally at the expense of women. Misogynistic themes in rock music have been ubiquitous, the Rolling Stones' "Midnight Rambler" being perhaps representative. Male power is also expressed in terms of women's usual position on the stage of rock performances (as backup singers), their treatment as a disposable part of the rock entourage (groupies), and as an invisible part of the record business (at best, as publicists). While Patti Smith, Blondie, and the Raincoats made certain interventions into male domination of hard rock performance, most seventies punk and New Wave music could hardly be described as feminist.

Yet while rock music has generally been male-engendered, a certain deconstruction of male identity has also occurred in the heart of the rock mainstream. Little Richard problematized male rock identity in the '50s. In the '60s, the Velvet Underground celebrated drugs and polymorphous sexuality at Andy Warhol's Factory scene, and the Kinks celebrated transvestitism in "Lola." Glam and glitter, personified in the presences of Bowie and T Rex, made sexual ambiguity stylish. While punk rock can be seen as a reaction against the artistic pretensions of glam, its roots can be traced to the cross-dressing New York Dolls.

The grunge explosion happened during a period when women rockers, specifically the "riot grrrls," were redefining the rock idiom in neopunk terms. Nirvana sensed the transition. "Been a Son," an early song that eventually wound up on *Incesticide*, is something of a feminist anthem. And once Cobain had achieved superstar status, he continued to promote less-well-known women artists and helped to spark interest in earlier women punk bands like the Raincoats.

Not unlike Lou Reed and David Bowie before him, Cobain drew on sexual ambiguity to authenticate outsider status and define the boundaries of the underground. In high school he was marked as gay by his close friendship with a gay classmate. "I started," said Cobain, "being proud of the fact that I was gay, even though I wasn't." As a member of Nirvana he consistently proclaimed his own bisexuality. "I

feel closer," he once said, "to the female side of the human being than I do the male." Courtney Love remarked, at one point: "He's made out with half the guys in Seattle" (Thompson 49-50). In the *In Utero* song "All Apologies," he sang, "Everyone is gay."

Members of Nirvana were, in fact, celebrated (and derided) for their proclivity to wear women's clothing. They wore dresses for the "In Bloom" video and went to the MTV Headbangers' Ball dressed in drag (Thompson 50). Cobain once said that he liked to paint his nails before putting on a dress (Powers 121). The *People* magazine memorial issue carried a photo of Cobain and bandmates wearing makeup, posing with guns (Dougherty 42-43). Arnold has remarked about the homoerotic atmosphere of the Seattle grunge scene, while also noting the misogynistic aspects of the indie scene in general (*Route 666* 121). For evidence of the latter, all one need do is take a look at some of Frank Kozik's posterwork for many of the bands ("Artrock Gallery" 18-21).

Grunge, then, followed as much as it led in terms of pluralizing masculinity in the rock underground or in pop culture generally. But male grunge artists like Cobain were partly responsible for an atmosphere in which women bands like L7, Babes in Toyland, Bikini Kill, and Hole transformed the meaning of rock music in the most dramatic fashion since the original punk explosion. "Riot grrrls" regenerated the excitement and power of original punk. That Hole's album *Live Through This* was chosen as the *Rolling Stone* 1994 best album ("Music Awards" 52) indicates that the focus and energy of new women rockers has had a wide impact on popular culture. Grunge, then, has important cultural connections to what Bikini Kill has called "REVOLUTION GIRL STYLE NOW" (Marcus, *Ranters* 371-72), which borrowed from early punk traditions and transformed them in original ways. Grunge supported, and was supported by, an alternative culture that has begun to substantially change the position of women in white rock music.

Conclusion

The political legacy of grunge, then, is complex and ambiguous. Grunge borrowed from the original impulses of the Sex Pistols and Clash while channeling them in specific ways. Early punk took aim at external representations of power, some musical (the Rolling Stones, Pink Floyd), some not (the Police, the Queen of England). Punk raged.

Punk shocked. Punk refused to back down. Punk subverted the 1960s counterculture of "love" with ironic and authentic hostility.

Grunge softened punk. Through grunge, punk achieved the accessibility that it loathed. The contradictions of a "punk mainstream" were represented in the musical career of Kurt Cobain, who hated the success that he so obviously craved. With Cobain's death, punk has imploded. Nirvana is the "last" (male) punk band, as punk's power is cast into the pop mainstream, where it will, no doubt, be erased, perhaps by the Beatlesque harmonies of Green Day.

Notes

1. See Greil Marcus on Elvis Costello, a figure who is sometimes unfairly derided as "New Wave." Marcus's 1980 remark on Costello rings truer now than ever: "Johnny Rotten rants and Costello sometimes sang ballads, but they were brothers under the hype. The difference was that if Rotten's flame-out was implicit in his own performance, no less implicit in Costello's was that he was a figure to be reckoned with over the long haul" (*Ranters and Crowd Pleasers* 136).

2. Strummer's commercial aspirations were, to say the very least, mixed. After the band achieved its first American Top Ten album with *Combat Rock* and first top ten single, "Rock the Casbah," in 1982, Strummer fired bassist Mick Jones (who had founded the band and who was in many ways its center) on the grounds that under his influence the band was becoming too mainstream. "Strummer announced, a pop star was all Mick Jones had ever wanted to be. He was a fake, a revisionist; he had to go" (Marcus, *Ranters and Crowd Pleasers* 303). Not long afterward, the band broke up. Strummer eventually released a solo project proving that he was capable of creating a piece of work with virtually no pop sensibilities (*Earthquake Weather*).

3. In the highly controversial *Vanity Fair* interview with Courtney Love, Cobain appears only as a ghostly background figure, who is disconsolate at seeing a heavy metal garbed figure in the parking lot of a 7-Eleven wearing a Nirvana T-shirt (Hirschberg 299). In spite of the musical associations between metal and grunge, a metal "attitude" was anathema to Cobain, in spite (or perhaps because) of its associations with the styles of working class kids.

4. Rough Trade personified the serious side of indie punk labels. The label offered no long-term contracts. Employers and employees were all paid equally

on an hourly basis. Bands were encouraged to play on one another's records, and two groups sometimes recorded on different sides of the same 45. The label, moreover, encouraged groups to move on once they had created enough of an audience to require capitalization of a larger indie (like Stiff), and thus room was constantly being made for newer groups to find record space (Marcus, *Ranters and Crowd Pleasers* 121).

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